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Notes on Richard Ned Lebow, Psychology & Deterrence, Jervis, Lebow and Stein (Balt., Johns Hopkins, 1985)

On the Deterrence Deadlock: Is There a Way Out?

Lebow's study of 13 brinkmanship crises--"confrontations in which states challenge important commitments of their adversaries in the expectation that the adversaries will back down" (180)--in Between Peace and War "found that almost without exception these crises could not readily be traced to grave foreign and domestic threats that leaders believed could be overcome only through an aggressive foreign policy."

As stated--and Lebow doesn't qualify it here--this statement seems almost tautological. What gives it content is that the emphasis is on "domestic" motives; the only "foreign" threat mentioned is one of a general nature--"the widely shared perception among policy makers that a dramatic negative shift in the balance of power was imminent"--rather than focussed on the immediate issues or region of the conflict.

In the latter cases, brinkmanship was conceived as "a means of preventing or even redressing the shift in the balance of power before time ran out and such a response became unrealistic." (7 of the 13 cases, including first Moroccan crisis, 1904-05). Lebow includes the Cuban missile crisis: but curiously, with respect to the Soviet Union's motives. "[T]he most widely held explanation of Khrushchev's decision to put missiles into Cuba [this is published in 1985, before the Cambridge Conference of 1987] attributes it to Soviet realization that the United States was capable of launching a first strike." (181)

But this "realization" was of no imminent change, or change at all. US announcement of its recognition of this reality was new, but even that lay in the recent past. In this case, the "challenger," Khrushchev, was trying to change the strategic balance, in his favor: from gross inferiority to a rough parity.

Incidentally, the missiles in Cuba would do nothing to prevent or redress US first strike capability; what they would do is roughly to match US first strike capability (if Khrushchev had, eventually, put a large number on Cuba, including IRBMs). Parity would then have been very unstable: neither would have had good second-strike capability, both having good first-strike capability. A dangerous, scary situation: yet Khrushchev could blame it on the US, since he would have done nothing more than to match US capabilities and deployment.

What good would that have done Khrushchev, strategically? The major effects would come from the act itself, assuming Khrushchev got away with it successfully:

1) humiliating the American president, paying him back for the Gilpatric speech, the need for the Wall, Quemoy, and the first-strike threats in the Ann Arbor speech and elsewhere, establishing a parity of "honor" and of dignity in subsequent bargaining, damaging Kennedy's self-confidence (and self-esteem and political prestige: a dangerous move, but one Khrushchev presumably saw as "necessary" retaliation, to "even the balance": as he put it, "let them have a taste of their own medicine" of encirclement and menace on their own borders).

(2) Demonstrating, by success, that there was now the military basis for diplomatic parity, parity of superpower rights in the world: after deployment, if not before.

But the actual existence of large numbers of IRBMs on Cuba would have greatly reduced the credibility of US first-use nuclear threats anywhere, against Soviets or the allies of the Soviets. To carry out such threats would involve a higher risk than before that the Soviets might retaliate in kind--in view of parity, daring the US to escalate further--or, perhaps more likely, might even strike first (in the belief that, after US first use, a full-scale war started by one side or the other was highly likely before long, given Schelling's "reciprocal fear of surprise attack" in such an unstable environment).

With the threat of first use rendered much less credible, the US position in Berlin would be less tenable, and the US might be significantly more willing to make concessions in new bargaining. Even if the US determination to stand firm was greater than before, after suffering one diplomatic humiliation, its allies in Europe would probably be much less willing than before to allow it to take military moves that might end in US first use, given the new danger that the Soviets would not back down and might actually launch a first strike.

Thus, Khrushchev's strategic motives do not fit this category of Lebow's; rather, the category fits Kennedy's motive in generating the "crisis," to forestall the change in the balance and the "provocative, insulting" manner in which Khrushchev was attempting to achieve it. (Kennedy was also deliberately choosing a response that was itself provocative and insulting, imposing a humiliation on Khrushchev to pay him back immediately for the insult of this attempt; this met both domestic and external objectives).

Nor does Khrushchev's other motive--what Sergo Mikoyan insists was his main motive--namely, averting an imminent

invasion of Cuba, fit any of the categories on which Lebow focusses. These are all domestic: political instability of the state itself; political weakness of leaders (either of these two causing leaders to seek a foreign policy victory to offset domestic discontent or buttress their domestic position); and intra-elite competition for power.

Kennedy's covert aggression against Cuba does, indeed, reflect mainly domestic needs rather than external "security"; Khrushchev's move, on the other hand, seems in this respect to respond to a genuine, serious foreign threat. (Ironically, this "straightforward, traditional" interpretation seems to have been considered neither by the ExComm nor by later scholars, even as a serious possibility. A number of the Excomm members knew about the October invasion planning; but there is no hint that any of them imagined how seriously this may have weighed among Khrushchev's concerns).

Thus, Khrushchev's move appears analogous to Russia's decision to back Serbia against threats of invasion by Austria in 1914. (Germany did not expect Russia to do this, because Russia's readiness program wouldn't be complete for two years; Russia seemed too weak, as indeed it proved to be). But Russia feared the effects of passivity and failing to save Serbia even more than it feared the risk of war (which it underrated: in all these respects, like Khrushchev and Cuba).

Again as in Cuba, Russia's support to its small ally took the fateful form of "first strike" threats--a general mobilization--to deter invasion by Austria. This proved provocative to Germany, counter-deterrent instead of deterrent. Likewise, the missiles in Cuba--while they may have prevented an invasion of Cuba that might otherwise have occurred--provoked credible threats and a real likelihood of attack on the missiles themselves, with a credible threat of invasion to follow.

Like Robert Kennedy's ultimatum on the night of October 27, the German response to Russian mobilization was an ultimatum with a short deadline, which was no bluff, demanding the mobilization be halted. The tsar failed to move as fast as Khrushchev did to concede (to what, in Khrushchev's case, might well have proved a bluff); as a result of his failure to face down his generals and to suspend, fast, a recklessly foolish "deterrent" move that had clearly failed to deter, he lost his empire and his life.

(Rusk has now revealed that Kennedy was ready to contemplate facing down his own generals and hawks and conceding--effective diplomatic parity--rather than carry out his own ultimatum of the night of October 27 and attack or invade, if Khrushchev had not conceded first. Whether he would have done so, we don't know; but he had, in fact, shown similar courage in backing his own

sense of prudence against the recommendations of his civilian and military advisors in refusing direct military support in the Bay of Pigs, and in refusing to send US combat units to Vietnam in the fall of 1961.

This was precisely the kind of courage that was missing in the tsar and in the German kaiser and chancellor in 1914. It is a kind of courage--a leader's resistance to hawkish, "macho" advisors, allies, subordinates--that I have paid insufficient attention to in the past. It emerges as important in this study of crises. Disobedience to malevolent authority--Milgram's focus, as a source of protection for society--needs to be matched by resistance by authorities to reckless, foolish, chauvinistic, militaristic advisors or subordinates or factions who will try to focus him on "commitments," "honor," leadership "duties" to [the empire], and the requirements of national and personal manliness. In short, we need to look at the conditions of courage to withstand appeals and challenges to demonstrate machismo, whether from above, below, or peers in an organizational or social hierarchy.

Note, for example, that Kennedy did not profile this type of courage or resolution on Saturday, October 27, which was the one time that the ExComm showed the quality I usually extol, a willingness to contradict and resist their boss's views. Kennedy gave in, that day, to their foolish, reckless insistence on rejecting the proposal of a public trade, and even accompanied his formal rejection that day with an ultimatum (apparently largely a bluff, perhaps intended as a last try at a win before following his own impulses and conceding).

The ironic result was a victory, on a scale unforeseen even by his hawks, rather than a diplomatic defeat; but that does not, as I see it, vindicate his compliance, against his own sound instinct. The rejection and ultimatum could well have led to an invasion of Cuba, and to dangerous confrontations elsewhere, but for a lucky (though dangerous) combination of Soviet loss of control of Castro's antiaircraft operations and Khrushchev's speed in cutting the risks that this posed in light of Kennedy's secret threats and continued US reconnaissance flights: both of which Kennedy had decided upon in ignorance of this situation.

--p. 182. The notion of machismo--never invoked by Lebow, who does not seem to raise gender issues, either--is very relevant to the perceived need that he often infers for statesmen to "act"--rather than to appear "passive, acquiescent, impotent"--and in particular to act "aggressively" (183, bottom). Both of these types of choices are defined by "style," nature of means, perhaps by contrast to alternatives: not by their consequences, outcomes, the probability of success or or various costs.

Lebow comes closest to expressing the gender-specific quality of this need when he says (188, underlining added): "Concern for a state's international reputation in the context of unresolved domestic problems further intensifies its perceived need to act "tough." (He goes on: "The most dangerous situation of all is when two powers or blocs feel the need, for these reasons, to display resolve in the same arena. This was true of Austria-Hungary and Russia prior to World War I." I am reminded of a sign during a Livermore demonstration: "How would you like to be a passenger on an airliner with two rival gangs of hijackers?").

Lebow sees this need as coming especially from domestic pressures, though it can be exacerbated by external setbacks, humiliations, failures, which can lead to a "Mayaguez mentality" in which leaders "cast about for cheap and dramatic ways of displaying resolve." (197). See Reagan and Grenada (after the death of Marines in Lebanon), and the various skirmishes with Libya, and the bombing of Tripoli, along with his determined support of the contras.

One of his points is that in this state of mind, leaders are hard to deter by demonstrations of adversaries' resolve. One reason for this (unmentioned by him) is that this image of leadership and activity--bold, heroic, above all manly--is enhanced by the existence of some risk, preferably at least somewhat excessive from the point of view of the immediate stakes. (This is a motive leading to "risk preference" which the usual axioms of rational choice under uncertainty rule out: ignoring, as they do, the importance of audience and self-esteem, identity).

Moreover, the type of "macho," man-of-honor, feudal/loyal/heroic image pursued here